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Ayi Kwei Armah's Two Thousand Seasons:

A Decolonized Form of Novel

Decolonization in cultural and intellectual terms, according to Armah in *Masks and Marx*, is the search or research for positive African ideas, perspectives, techniques, value and that enterprise tautologically is centered on Africa" (64). African novel is a novel of commitment with a professed aim of decolonizing the mind. As conscious craftsman of African fiction Ayi Kwei Armah makes an all out effort to make use of his national, ethnic or religious myths, beliefs, aesthetic outlook, philosophy and language. In his search for roots the artist realizes that it is the rich oral traditions "orature" or "griouture" that will help in rejuvenating his African imagination. This is the impelling reason that makes him experiment with the novel form, i.e., "to accommodate (it)... to African reality" , he weaves his magic web through two distinct traditions the oral and the written (Obeichina, *Culture* 261-62). "[M]indful of the need to represent the whole national, they strive to accommodate the style and form to pressures from within and without by a constant process of evolution and adaptation, contriving new blends, experimental marriages with oral literature of orature and hybrid compromises with folklore" (Frazer, *Lifting* 33). Precisely at this point, in Fanon's view, when the focus on a new audience has taken root, can national literature be said to have come into being" (*Wretched* 193).

This redefinition of the audience, this creation of a completely new public, necessarily disrupts the entire vocation of literary creation. In this process new forms, new styles and new themes emerge to characterize the emergent national literature. In Fanon's conception a national literature may properly be called a "literature of combat" , in the sense that.

It calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a national. it is a literature of combat, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space. (193).

The revolutionary nature of this literature, its fighting spirit, comes to provide oral literature with a new value and a new orientation altogether. Again, in the words of Fanon: The oral tradition stories, epics and songs of the people which formerly were filed away as set pieces are now beginning to change. the storytellers who used to relate inert episodes now bring them alive and introduce into them modifications which are increasingly fundamental. there is a tendency to bring conflicts up to date and to modernize the kinds of struggle which the stories evoke, together with the names of heroes and the types of weapons. (Wretched 193).

It is these attributes of national literature, which Fanon saw as developing independently in oral literature, that came to manifest in African novelists. Though almost all the artists use orature as a strategic device in recuperating indigenous voices and coining anti-hegemonic discourse, the level of sensitivity to oral forms varies in degree. Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* makes an all out effort to indigenize the alien language and form by incorporating elements from oral tradition. He seems to follow Ngugi's call:

...no foreigners can ever develop our languages, our literature...we in turn cannot develop our languages , our literatures through borrowed tongues and imitations . Only by a return to the roots ... can we rise to the challenge of helping in the creation of... national literature"(*Writers in Politics* 64). In order to Africanize the novel form he adopts stylistic techniques of the oral

tradition. However Armah does not use orality as "Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka had done... in their English Language works" (Gikandi, "Conversions" 138). In *Two Thousand Seasons*, Armah does not incorporate orature as an element to merely add African authenticity. The oral elements are not interspersed here and there as a patch work but serve as the overall structuring principle of his novel. By his conscious experimentation with the Oral tradition of narrativity Armah revolutionizes the form of the traditional novel and amply shows how innovatively the African sensibility can transmute the canonical novel; and make its own, *Two Thousand Seasons* emerges as a novel heralding a complete wedding between orature and the novel. Derek Wright calls it "grioture: oral in conception but literary in expression" (Ayi Kwei: Armah's Africa 228). *Two Thousand Seasons* is Armah's "daring experimentation with the African oral narrative" (Derek Wright, JCL 95) Most of the times it reads like an "African oral chronicle" (Palmer 223).

Like a griot Armah's didactic purpose is to correct the method of narrating African history as well as history. Armah's "self consciously staged griot like discourse ... is to cure an errant Africa of its diseased distrust in its indigenous forms and value. Like a griot Armah licences historical inaccuracies such as the notions that kings, classes, private property are all foreign importations (61,64,82,95). Derek Wright holds that "*Two Thousand Seasons* is the kind of novel that a griot would have written if he had access to literary form" (African Literature Today 86). In fact Derek Wright is overstating the case. No doubt Armah is using the tradition of griot as a mode of narrativity and in a powerful manner, yet he does it with a difference. He is not there like a griot simply to glorify his narration as a romanticist. On the other hand he is a realist through and through rewriting history with a clear critical objectivity. Armah neither glamorizes history nor does he narrate the grand stories of kings and queens. He democratizes the griot. Instead of singing regal stories, his is the task of resituating the most marginalized in a pan Africanist way. He makes a daring attempt to transmute the traditional

means of story telling by the griot on behalf of the whole community, and by doing so, reproduce the traditional reciprocity between the teller and his chosen audience. In a nutshell Armah has adopted and adapted the stylistic oral technique of griot to the problems of contemporary Africa. Isidore Okpewho in *Myth and Modern Fiction* illustrates how and why Armah makes significant departures from the story telling traditions:

His avowedly anti-elitist standpoint shuns the griot's customary glorification of the matchless deeds of past heroes, rejects the supernatural along with superhuman, and denies the narrator's single creative personality any domineering proprietorship over the events narrated. (6)

For example Armah refuses to incorporate the traditional praise-kings of the griots as the purpose of his novel is to focus on communal, suffering. Moreover Armah's Pan- African world view does not spare any scope on focusing on particular period of the reign of individual. the most significant difference, however, is the substitution of the collective "we" for the traditional singular artistic personality. The first paragraph of the first chapter opens with plural 'we'. "We the people are not a people of yesterday..." The constant repetition of the collective voice of "our remembrance" communicates a message of joint suffering and sharing. His narrative strategy emphasis the griot's self- effacing assumption of common identity with the people. This is his methodology of self- extinction and dissolving his personality into the forays of orature and gets a kind of objectivity and neutrality of his craft. The personal 'I' is transmuted to "we". The very use of the collective voice at the beginning of the novel formally announces the voice of the griot in plurality. On the very opening pages of the novel, as a griot, the narrator aims at narrating the truth, nothing else but the whole truth.

We have not found that lying trick to our taste, the trick of making up sure knowledge of things possible ... to think of things possible to wonder about but impossible to know in any

such ultimate way. We are not stunted in spirit, we are not Europeans ... What we do not know we do not claim to know. (3)

These lines amply bear Armah's promise of becoming a neutral observant, a medium of narrativity without taking sides.

Against the novelistic conventions, Armah for the first time adds a prologue to his novel. The Prologue, in a very poetic manner announces that the battle between good and evil has been incessantly going on since times immemorial. The symbols of 'desert' usurping the 1811ds; and springs eternally trying to flower the deserts are the key metaphors manifesting this battle. The symbols definitely show that Armah does not write simply about the good and evil forces that are entrenching his country or Africa but the whole civilization. Despite being universal Armah invokes African oral poetry. The powerful prologue is written in the "style of the African vatic utterance or that of African dirge" (Palmer 222) as in:

Woe the headwater needing to give, giving only to floodwater flowing desert ward.
Woe the link from stream to stream. Woe the link receiving spring water only to pass it on in
a stream flowing to waste. seeking extinction (8)

Like an oral story, the story line is exposed by the story-teller in the beginning itself:
We repositories of the remembrance of the way violated, we, portion that sought the meaning
of Anoa's utterance in full and found another home on this land, we, fraction that crossed
mountains ...we, life's people of the way, trapped now in our smallest self, that is our vocation;
to find our larger, our healing self, we the black people ... (9)

In keeping with the oral epic tradition, the narrator makes an effective use of invocation, flashback and digressions in the course of the narrative. In keeping with the oral tradition, the narrator invokes:

You hearers, seers, imaginers, remember, you prophets called to communicate truths of
the living way to a people fascinated unto death, you called to link memory with forelistening,

to join the uncountable seasons of our flowing to unknown tomorrows even more numerous, communicators doomed to pass on truths of our origins to a people rushing deathward, grown contemptuous in our ignorance of our source, prejudiced against our own survival, how shall our vocations utterance be heard? (xi)

Like a traditional griot the narrator mixes anticipation and retrospection to dramatically narrate his tale. The narrator uses rogatio: question and answer technique in order to ensure a meaningful communal and participatory response.

Armah uses repetition to reproduce an illusion of orality also. Traditionally, the oral narrative edits itself by recantation and cancellation, never by omission, i.e., once something has been said, it exists ineradicably and is apt to convey emphasis quantitatively rather than qualitatively, by frequency rather than the manner of expression.

Their news of communities was of community too far off focus us ...

Their news was also of relationship ...

Their news was of the way, the forgotten ... (5)

In the tradition of griot Armah repeats his things at least three times to lay stress or to provide the incantatory effect.

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected sight, the fractured vision ...

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected hearing, the shattered hearing ...

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected thinking, the broken reason ...

In the tradition of orature Armah bases his novel on the prophecy of Anoa. Anoa's seminal philosophy is cast in vatic form. While rewriting historiography of "Two Thousand Seasons: a thousand dry. a thousand moist" (16), Armah makes us hear Armah's prophecy who had foretold and forewarned the white man's systemic malice. Tracing the degradation suffered by Africa in its first thousand seasons, Armah makes us hear the prophecy of Anoa:

Turn from this generosity of fools. The giving that is split from receiving is no generosity but hatred of the giving self, a preparation for the self's destruction. Turn. Return to the way, the way of reciprocity. This headlong generosity too proud to think of returns, it will be your destruction. Turn. (16)

In order to make his text performative Armah incorporates the traditional dance. The fable of adult genesis is presented through the dance of love. "The dance of love is a dance of choice ... It has always been the custom at the] festival that the growing women of the age, if they are already of a mind to do so, choose the growing men they wish to share their lives with" (90). Armah provides a detailed presentation of the dance:

Three circles dance: the girls of the season within, the pairs of the last adult generation next, then without the boys of the season. Between any two dancers in the second circle there is the space of a single dancing step, one swift beat and no more. The dancers in the centre make their choices one by one. But to reach her choice in the outer circle each growing girl has to dance with skill enough to cut through the middle circle untouched by any member of the older pairs, so reaching the welcome of the male outer circle, dancing still. Once there she is entirely free to dance to the lover of her choice ... (91)

Armah strains to provide a touch of orality, and specifically of vatic utterance through a formidable battery of rhetorical questions, and lamentations. He punctuates his text as if it were an oral tale. He uses many exclamatory sentences to give a look of oral narrativity. In order to create a feeling of disgust among the readers/audience he "following the fashion of Ewe halo hurls abuse at the destroyers and predators" (Bitek 8).

Armah's style demonstrates that Armah has made use of varied aspects of African oral narrative tradition. It is replete with oral echoes. Armah's method of merging oral elements with the novel form is unique and innovative. Armah has been successful in creating a pseudo-oral narrative. To Derek Wright, Armah's experimentation is "literary affectation" (African

Literature Today 86). It is rendered in English, not in Akan or Kiswahili. Wright holds that since the communal readings of novel written in English are rare in Africa, the traditional communal intimacy between the artist and audience is here a mere fiction of the plural voice. Armah's language maintains "an icy distance" (McEwan 45) from the common uneducated masses of Ghana. *Two Thousand Seasons* as such does not become a populist novel. But one thing for sure is that Armah has transcended the purist concept of the novel as a genre and heralded a new form of the African novel.

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